

The Militant and Terrorist Threat in the Asia Pacific: Current Situation and How it Can Be Better Addressed

Andrew T H Tan
Associate Professor
University of New South Wales
Email: Andrew.tan@unsw.edu.au

COPYRIGHTED DRAFT: NOT TO BE CITED WITHOUT PERMISSION

Terrorist Attacks After 9-11

After the seminal terrorist attacks in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001 (or 9-11), the USA was able to call upon its allies from around the world to help it pursue Al Qaeda leaders and operatives, freeze its assets, and destroy its sanctuaries as well as overthrow the fundamentalist regime that had provided it with sanctuary in Afghanistan. By September 2003, two years after 9-11, the US claimed to have killed or captured 3,000 Al Qaeda members, or two-thirds of its membership, and destroyed all its sanctuaries in Afghanistan.¹ Despite the fact that the top two leaders, Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri, remained at large, it appeared that the concerted security, intelligence and military efforts had paid off and that there was progress in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT).

This claim would have been plausible if there was clear progress measured in the fall in the number of Al Qaeda-led or inspired terrorist attacks, the fall in the number of people recruited to the terrorist cause, the reduction in support for Al Qaeda and its radical ideology by its constituents, and the general improvement in the sense of safety from terrorism that the general public felt. But events since 9-11 have proved that none of these have been achieved despite the evident tactical successes against Al Qaeda. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that the overall, the GWOT has made little headway. This has been reflected in the relentless wave of Al Qaeda-linked or inspired terrorist attacks worldwide.

Following 9-11, the designation of South-East Asia, especially the Malay archipelago, as the 'second front' in the Global War on Terror (or GWOT) was not unexpected. The region has the world's largest population of Muslims, which in the view of the USA might conceivably offer refuge to fleeing radical terrorists. Indeed, the first major terrorist attack after 9-11 occurred in Southeast Asia on 12 October 2002 in Indonesia, when suicide bomb attacks on the popular tourist island of Bali in Indonesia killed 202 people, of whom 164 were foreign nationals. Subsequent investigations led to the arrest of members of the secretive radical Islamist network.² This network is known as the Jemaah Islamiah (JI) or Al Jama'ah Al-Islamiyyah (Islamic Group), which aimed to use violence to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate in Southeast Asia that would cover the Malay Archipelago, home to the world's largest population of Muslims.³

The JI, however, was exposed even before the Bali bombing, when initial arrests of 13 of its operatives took place in early 2002 following the discovery of its ultimately abortive Singapore bomb plots. The JI had planned, in conjunction with Al Qaeda, a major series of terrorist attacks in Singapore targeting Western embassies, several key

US companies, US ships and military personnel, and local military facilities. To-date, over 400 alleged JI operatives have been arrested throughout the region, including its key operations commander and liaison with Al Qaeda, Hambali, who was arrested in Thailand and is now in US custody.⁴

Research by Sidney Jones and others have uncovered links between the JI network and the abortive Darul Islam rebellion in Indonesia in the 1950s.⁵ That rebellion, which aimed to establish an Islamic state in Indonesia, resulted in the loss of some 25,000 lives. After it was crushed in 1960, however, its ideals survived. Both Abu Bakar Bashir and Abdullah Sungkar, the alleged co-founders of the JI, see themselves as its ideological successors. In the 1970s, they established a boarding school in Java from which many JI members were educated. They later fled to Malaysia after attracting the attention of the security services, where they allegedly established the JI network in the early 1990s. The JI later established links with ex-Afghan *mujahideen* volunteers who returned to Southeast Asia after fighting the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s. The JI also developed close links with Al Qaeda, receiving funding and ideological training. Its own networked organisational structure mirrors that of Al Qaeda and consists of autonomous cells united by radical Islamism. However, indicative of the nature of the worldwide Al Qaeda network, the JI operated independently and makes most of its operational decisions locally.⁶ Indeed, JI members also sometimes possess dual memberships in local militant groups.⁷ The phenomenon of the JI and other similar Al Qaeda affiliates is indicative of the global nature of the radical Islamist threat as well as the difficulty in countering what has become a global movement.

The JI has been responsible for many recent terrorist attacks apart from Bali in 2002. They include the Christmas bombings in Manila and Jakarta in 2000, the Marriott Hotel attack in Jakarta in 2003, the bomb attack on the Australian High Commission in Jakarta in 2004, and the second Bali attack in October 2005.⁸

Current State of the JI

Arrests following the failed Singapore bomb plots and the deadly Bali attack in 2002 significantly weakened the Al Qaeda-JI nexus in the region. Those arrested included senior Al Qaeda operatives such as Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi and Jabarah Mohammad Mansour, who were arrested in 2002, in the Philippines and Oman respectively; Omar al-Faruq, an Iraqi citizen, in Indonesia in 2002; and Riduan Isamuddin (or Hambali), in Thailand in 2003. Both Omar al-Faruq and Hambali were subsequently transferred to US custody. Omar provided authorities with a much clearer assessment of Al Qaeda and JI activities in the region, which included a plan to assassinate President Megawati of Indonesia. Hambali, dubbed the 'Osama bin Laden' of South-East Asia by US intelligence services, was the chief strategist behind many terrorist attacks in the region. Another counter-terrorist success occurred in November 2005, when an important bomb-maker, Azahari Husin, was killed by security forces in Indonesia.⁹

JI elements have also been involved in local Muslim militias responsible for violence in Maluku and Sulawesi, in Indonesia, the scene of bitter Christian-Muslim clashes between 1999 and 2002, resulting in the deaths of over 10,000 people. A detailed assessment of that conflict is beyond the scope of this essay, suffice to say that after the conflict broke out in 1999 following minor incidences in the cities of Ambon and

Poso, local Christians attacked Muslims, resulting in retaliatory attacks by Muslims. Thereafter, various *jihadist* groups from Java became involved. The causes of the local civil conflict lie in economic competition in the midst of the economic crisis gripping Indonesia at the time, which exacerbated resentment against the influx of mostly Muslim migrants. This resentment had been building for decades, with much unhappiness over the perceived Islamization of both the central government and the civil service. There has also been much resentment over the lucrative contracts held by military-backed companies engaged in fisheries, forestry and mining.¹⁰ Not surprisingly, calls for independence in these islands have been made.¹¹ While many of these grievances are clearly not religious, religion became a central issue once violence broke out.

Javanese-based radical groups that became involved included the Laskar Jihad (later disbanded in 2002), the JI, elements of the old Darul Islam, the Mujahideen KOMPAK (the military wing of a Muslim charity), and a Makassar-based Muslim militia, the Laskar Jundullah, which has close links with Al Qaeda through its leader, Agus Dwikarna. Many of these radical groups believed that the Christian community in the islands posed a threat to Muslims and that the sectarian violence provided the perfect opportunity to develop the *jihadist* mentality that would strengthen support for the eventual establishment of an Islamic state in Indonesia and beyond. In December 2001, the then Coordinating Minister for People's Welfare Yusuf Kalla managed to bring the warring parties together at Malino in south Sulawesi to agree to a ceasefire. In February 2002, the ceasefire was formalised into a peace agreement known as the Malino Accord.¹² Although the peace accord has largely held, communal tensions as a result of that conflict remained, stoked by the involvement of JI. In April 2001, three Christian men were sentenced to death for their roles in the sectarian violence, and one of them, Fabianus Tibo, named 16 Christian masterminds in his defence plea. Despite the subsequent executions of the three, a key demand of the Muslims has been the arrest of the 16 alleged masterminds. The peace agreements might also have had a chance of success had the promised economic reconstruction, social assistance programs and resettlement of displaced persons been carried out. Instead, massive corruption resulted in their failure. Moreover, the disaffected Mujahideen KOMPAK, who comprised locals who had relatives or friends killed in the conflict, continued to carry out a number of attacks against Christians.¹³

In January 2007, two police raids in Poso in Sulawesi island after 3 schoolgirls were beheaded by militants resulted in the deaths of 17 men and the arrest of more than 20, most of whom were local JI members.¹⁴ The operations revealed the links between the JI in Java to the militant violence in Poso. Indeed, a steady stream of religious teachers had come to Poso since the sectarian conflict begun to proselytize and recruit, as the JI saw the area as having great potential to become a secure base for the establishment and expansion of a Muslim community according to radical Islamist precepts, given the very real grievances and sense of injustice local Muslims felt. JI's Javanese leaders in Poso were arrested or fled. The Poso operations also led to further arrests in March 2007 by Densus 88, the Indonesian police counter-terrorism unit, of seven operatives in Central and East Java, the seizure of a huge cache of explosives and weapons, as well as documents revealing JI's plan to assassinate police officers, prosecutors and judges. In June 2007, a key JI leader, Yusron Mahbudi (Abu Dujana) was arrested, dealing a major blow to JI's overall operational capabilities.¹⁵

Jl is presently reported to have fragmented, with some members disapproving of the resort to wanton violence, and others, such as Noordin Mohammed Top, working hard to establish links with other jihadist groups in the region in order to continue terrorist attacks on Western targets. Noordin leads, by self-proclamation, the Jl's military wing, which he has named 'Al Qaeda in the Malay Archipelago'.¹⁶ Having become the region's most wanted terrorist, he narrowly escaped capture in April 2006 although two of his close associates were killed by security forces.¹⁷ Another key figure who joined the most wanted list in early 2008 was Mas Selamat Kasturi, a key Jl operative who escaped from detention in Singapore and sparked a worldwide Interpol alert as he had planned major terrorist operations before his arrest in Indonesia and deportation to Singapore in 2006.¹⁸

The recent successes of Indonesian security forces have dealt a major blow to Jl's operational effectiveness. Many top Jl operatives and bomb-makers have been arrested or killed, and the Jl's Sulawesi operations have been shut down. However, Mohamed Noordin Top remains on the run. Together with the presence of *ex-mujahideen* from Afghanistan, new recruits from local conflict areas such as in Sulawesi and Maluku, and a solid core estimated to total more than 900, the terrorist threat from the Jl, whilst diminished, remains fairly serious.

Non-Jl Terrorist Groups

However, the Jl is not the only radical terrorist threat. Since 1978 there has been a series of violent incidents involving militants in Malaysia.¹⁹ In July 2000, 15 members of the extremist al-Ma'unah (Brotherhood of Inner Power) raided a military armoury in the village of Sauk in Perak. They were surrounded and subsequently overpowered by army commandos. The group has now been banned by the Malaysian government.²⁰ In the same year the extremist Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia (KMM; also known as Kumpulan Militan Malaysia) was uncovered after a failed bomb attack on a shopping mall. Members of the group had attended *mujahideen* training camps in Afghanistan operated by Al Qaeda, and they had established links with extremists in the Middle East and in Indonesia, where they participated in sectarian Muslim-Christian violence in the Maluku islands.²¹ KMM members have been arrested and the group has been banned.

In the Philippines, the Al Qaeda-linked Abu Sayaff Group (ASG) has posed a serious threat to security. Founded in 1991 by former *mujahideen* who had returned from Afghanistan to South-East Asia, the ASG established strong connections with Al Qaeda, which sent Ramzi Yousef (responsible for the World Trade Center bombing in New York in 1993) to train its members in the use of explosives. Through extortion, kidnapping for ransom activities, assassinations and urban bombings, the ASG has been able to wreak havoc in the southern Philippines. In April 2000 the group attracted world-wide attention when it kidnapped 21 hostages, including a number of Western tourists, during an assault on the Malaysian island resort of Sipadan. The ASG and Jl are believed to have carried out the deadly ferry bombing in Manila Bay in February 2004, which resulted in the deaths of more than 100 people.²² Following 9-11, the United States has sent about 200 troops to help train and provide technical and surveillance support for the Philippine army in its operations against the ASG's estimated 2,000 members. The US has also, through USAID, provided US\$260 million in development aid to Mindanao and Sulu focusing on reintegrating former

separatists, and improving local governance and infrastructure.²³ In August 2006, the Philippine army launched a major operation which led to the death of ASG leader Khadaffy Janjalani and the capture of ASG camps. Khadaffy however, has been replaced by Yasser Igasan, a Syrian-trained Islamic scholar believed to have close ties with foreign radical jihadists.²⁴

The authorities have also been troubled by the terrorist activities of a relatively new radical group, the Rajah Solaiman Movement, which reportedly consists of Catholic converts. The fears of the authorities have been raised following evidence that this group has trained suicide bombers to attack business centers, shopping malls, government facilities, transportation facilities, and to assassinate President Arroyo.²⁵

The Situation in the Southern Philippines

There have also been continuing reports of JI activists taking refuge in the southern Philippines, among renegade factions of the main separatist group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF).²⁶ The MILF, however, has long been involved in negotiations with the Government of the Philippines over a lasting peace agreement. The MILF had established ties with Osama bin Laden in the 1990s, who had provided funds and training.²⁷ But the events of 9-11 prompted an about-turn from the MILF.²⁸ After agreeing to a ceasefire in 2001, the MILF also agreed to the joint training with the Philippine government of local ceasefire monitoring teams.²⁹ In June 2002, the MILF offered to fight “hand in hand” with the Philippine military to end the ASG problem.³⁰ The positive attitude of the MILF led to the government’s chief negotiator for peace talks, Jesus Dureza, stating in October 2002 that the MILF was “friendlier than the government” in building a climate of peace and development, citing the opposition of some military officials who appeared intent on using force to resolve the Moro problem.³¹

The death of long-time MILF leader Hashim Selamat through natural causes in 2003 and the succession of Murad Ebrahim as the new leader has improved the prospects for peace. A moderate, nationalistic-type leader, Murad has consistently reiterated the MILF’s territorial and nationalistic, as opposed to religious, objectives. The appointment of a more enlightened Philippine army commander in Mindanao in 2007, Major-General Raymundo Ferrer, has also helped, as he has emphasised a non-traditional approach focusing on development and education as important steps to peace-building.³² The presence of an International Monitoring Team from Malaysia, Brunei, Libya and Japan has also provided favourable conditions for negotiations to take place.³³ A final peace agreement, possibly in 2008, would bring greater peace and stability to the southern Philippines.

Despite these positive developments, however, there is evidence that some renegade MILF commanders have continued to provide sanctuary to JI fugitives. ASG members have also found sanctuary in territory controlled by the rival Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), which had signed a peace agreement with the government in 1996. The presence of younger, extremist elements in the MILF and MNLF, as well as in other radical groups such as Abu Sayyaf and the Rajah Solaiman Movement, virtually ensures that the violence will not be ended even if the MILF were to sign a peace agreement.

The Situation in Southern Thailand

The long-running Muslim separatist insurgency in southern Thailand has shown no sign of abating. The southern provinces were part of the old historical kingdom of Patani, which was invaded by Siam in 1786 and then incorporated through the Anglo-Siamese Treaty of 1909. The Malays have always viewed this as unjust, viewing Bangkok as an occupying power. The Thai government increased this sense of alienation when it tried, prior to 1977, to pursue a policy of assimilation. After that, a more enlightened, comprehensive approach helped reduce the severity of the on-going separatist insurgency. However, things took a turn for the worse under the Thaksin government, which centralised control in 2002 after it came to power. It also took a tough military-oriented approach to the separatist problem, emphasising the use of force in dealing with the upsurge in violence as a result of growing discontent. Inevitably, this led to two shocking incidences. On 28 April 2004, security forces killed 108 young Muslims in one day, 32 of them whilst sheltering at the historic Krue Se mosque. On 25 October 2004, at Tak Bai, 78 unarmed Muslim protesters died after they suffocated in police vans.³⁴ These incidences have deeply angered Muslims, provided grounds for Islamist radicals to seek to link the troubles in the south with the global jihad, and prompted even greater violence in response.

The Thai authorities initially claimed that the insurgents had deep links with Al Qaeda. Whilst there is evidence that JI and Al Qaeda operatives have found shelter amongst co-religionists in southern Thailand, the extent and depth of the global jihadist linkages has been disputed.³⁵ Although the scale of violence has dramatically increased since 2001, the attacks do not bear the hallmarks of Al Qaeda. Indeed, Western tourists and interests have not been targeted. The insurgency remained local and nationalist in orientation, and has also been largely confined to the four southern Muslim provinces. According to key Al Qaeda-JI commander, Hambali, now in US custody, the insurgents had rebuffed Al Qaeda when approached for assistance to carry out bombings in Thailand.³⁶

The coup against the Thaksin Government in September 2006 and its replacement by an interim administration led by Surayud Chulanont appeared to offer fresh prospects for resolving the insurgency. Surayud made an unprecedented apology to the Muslims of southern Thailand for past abuses, announced an end to the 'blacklisting' of suspected insurgents and expanded efforts at reconciliation.³⁷ However, the uncoordinated approach and lack of a strategic plan led to uneven implementation and the alienation of the Buddhist population. The separatists responded by intensifying violence against Buddhist civilians, leading to increased communal tensions and vigilante action against Muslims by Buddhists.

The election of a new government in Thailand in December 2007 has not contributed to better prospects for peace, since the victorious People's Power Party is closely connected to the deposed Thaksin government that had pursued a tough military-security approach to the insurgency, with disastrous results. The lack of political leadership, and the failure to address fundamental grievances of the Malay Muslims in the south has increased the danger that the hitherto ethno-nationalist orientation of the current insurgency could be increasingly supplanted by radical Islamism through increased linkages with global jihadists. This would not only increase the level of

violence but result in its expansion beyond the four southern provinces. Will southern Thailand become eventually transformed into the region's Chechnya?

The Situation in Aceh

Another serious Muslim separatist insurgency had been present in Aceh in Indonesia. However, the massive tsunami in December 2004 which destroyed Bandar Aceh and killed 127,000 people in Indonesia galvanized the peace process, given the evident need for reconstruction. This led to the peace agreement in August 2005 in Helsinki, under which GAM agreed to disarm and take part instead in the political process, whilst the province would get greater autonomy and the military would withdraw.³⁸

Local elections were held in December 2006 and won by Irwandi Yusuf, a former commander of the main rebel group, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM). However, the peace agreement has been undermined by political infighting within GAM between the Old Guard exiled leadership and younger commanders who had fought in Aceh. Since gaining power in 2006, GAM has also failed to deal with the many economic and social issues in the province. In addition, the passage of the Law on Governing Aceh in June 2006 appeared to undermine the Helsinki agreement by weakening some of the provincial government's authority.³⁹ Unless there is visible progress in meeting the political and economic aspirations of the Acehnese people, a return to violence by disaffected Acehnese cannot therefore be ruled out. Worse, if the nationalists in GAM fail, the Acehnese could be more amenable to radical Islam.

The ETIM in China

A growing radical terrorist challenge has in recent years emerged from the Uyghur Muslim separatist movement in Xinjiang, in China. Like other separatist movements in Asia, the cause of this insurgency lies with fundamental political, economic and social grievances that have deep historical origins. The Uyghurs have never accepted Chinese rule and have resisted Chinese attempts at assimilation. The resentment has been exacerbated by massive Chinese migration. The end of the Cold War, the disintegration of the former USSR, the independence of former Central Asian states, and the more open borders as a result of China's drive for modernization has provided fresh impetus to Uighur separatism. In the early 1990s, 13 clandestine organisations established a broad Eastern Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM), the objective of which is the secession of Xinjiang from China. The ETIM has carried out numerous terrorist attacks in China, with most of these being perpetrated in the Xinjiang region, although they have operated in neighbouring Central Asian states. According to the Chinese authorities, the low-level insurgency led to some 200 attacks between 1990 and 2001, resulting in the deaths of 162 people. The response of the Chinese Government has been harsh, with summary executions, torture and detention without trial.⁴⁰

However, any criticism of this policy became muted after 9-11, particularly after Uyghurs training with Al Qaeda and the Taliban were captured by US forces in Afghanistan. ETIM itself has established strong connections with Al Qaeda, with which it has received funding and training. In 2002, the USA therefore designated ETIM as a terrorist organization.⁴¹ To address the Islamist threat in Central Asia, in June 2001 China helped to found the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO),

grouping China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. It has established a counter-terrorism agency located in the Uzbek capital of Tashkent, and co-ordinated counter-terrorism exercises among the partners.⁴² The absence of verifiable news regarding the activities of ETIM in China has made assessments difficult to make. However, Chinese authorities revealed in March 2008 that it had foiled an attempt by ETIM to hijack a passenger airplane originating from Xinjiang and bound for Beijing. Two female suspects are said to have attempted to ignite an explosive on the aircraft but were detected and subdued.⁴³ If this story is indeed verified, it would indicate that radical terrorist threats to embarrass the Chinese Government before or during the Beijing Olympics exist.

The Threat of Militant Terrorism in the Asia Pacific

In sum, the terrorist threat in the Asia Pacific is a mixed one. In Southeast Asia, the situation in Indonesia has improved due to the successes of Indonesian counter-terrorism efforts in 2007, which is believed to have dealt a major blow to JI's operational capabilities. However, the situation in Sulawesi, Maluku and Aceh is fragile due to the failure of post-conflict reconstruction, and the JI retains a core following. The most successful outcomes have been in Malaysia and Singapore. In Malaysia, the authorities have always been vigilant and prepared to take forceful preventive measures, utilising the preventive detention provisions under the country's Internal Security Act, to prevent militants from carrying out any terror attack. The authorities in Singapore have similarly been very pro-active in using preventive measures, again utilising the Internal Security Act. The 31 detained JI suspects involved in the failed Singapore bomb plots have been subjected to efforts by the authorities to rehabilitate them, following the success of such programs in the 1960s when dealing with members of the Malayan Communist Party. The program has had some success, with 11 men released between 2004 and 2006, although overall it has proven difficult to change the deeply-held radical views of some of those detained.⁴⁴

The situation in the southern Philippines has improved but despite improved prospects for a comprehensive peace agreement with the main separatist group, the MILF, there exist a number of smaller, radical groups that will ensure that the violence will continue. The Moro problem in the south is likely to remain a long-term challenge. The situation in southern Thailand has deteriorated in the past decade due to largely to gross mismanagement, to the point that a real transformation from an ethno-nationalist insurgency to a jihadist movement cannot be ruled out. In China, the spread of radical ideology through Central Asia has galvanised the ETIM separatists, who have shown renewed signs of vigour in recent years, for instance, through its presence in Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in 2001, and its purported attempt at replicating a mini 9-11 in China in March 2008.

Challenges for Counter-Terrorism

What the outbreak of radical terrorist attacks across the world since 9-11 demonstrates is that Al Qaeda and its associates worldwide have not only weathered unprecedented security operations by military and security forces all over the world, they have in fact adapted, evolved and grown into an even deadlier global insurgency. This global insurgency does not have any real central directing authority and indeed has none or very tenuous links with Al Qaeda itself, but consists mainly of local groups motivated

by the same radical ideology, driven by causes such as the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq, and fired up by local political, economic and social grievances.

As Bruce Hoffman noted in his testimony in the US Congress in February 2006:

Al Qaeda's greatest achievement has been the makeover it has given itself since 2001. The current Al Qaeda thus exists more as an ideology than as an identifiable, unitary terrorist organisation. It has become a vast enterprise – an international franchise with like-minded local representatives, loosely connected to a central ideological or motivational base, but advancing the remaining center's goals at once simultaneously and independently of each other ... the result is that today there are many Al Qaedas rather than the single Al Qaeda of the past.⁴⁵

Many of the techniques and skills required for the many deadly contemporary terrorist attacks that have taken place around the world since 9-11 have been imparted by Al Qaeda to its own operatives and many more through its training manuals, as well as training camps in Afghanistan in the 1990s. For instance, although suicide bombings as a terrorist tactic is not new, Al Qaeda has played an important role in its spread, facilitating its adoption by local groups and radical associates around the world, including in the Philippines and Indonesia.⁴⁶ Al Qaeda has succeeded in justifying it ideologically and glorifying it to such a degree that there have been many willing volunteers. Suicide bombings are very hard to counter as there is little effective defence against a terrorist determined to die along with the victims. Its success has led to many terrorist attacks since 9-11.

The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 has also turned Iraq into a vast training center for terrorists. The insurgency there has attracted *mujahideen* from all over the world, and Iraq is proving to be a very useful training ground for honing all the necessary skills in urban terrorism, such as the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), car and truck bombs, suicide attacks, ambushes, assassinations, kidnapping, sniper attacks and sabotage. As Hoffman noted, the application of these newly learned capabilities to urban centers elsewhere could result in the escalation of violence, reaching into countries and regions that hitherto have experienced little organized jihadi violence.⁴⁷ It is clear that Al Qaeda's training, funding and its ideological propaganda has had a significant impact on local militant groups, improving their motivation, operational effectiveness and organisation, and raising the lethality of terrorist attacks to a new level previously unseen in the region. This is already happening in Southeast Asia, in the case of the deadly Bali bombing in 2002 that killed 202 people. In southern Thailand, insurgents have, since 2005, begun to use weapons and tactics that appear to have been imported from Iraq and Afghanistan, such as the use of mobile phones to trigger bombs, and IEDs as roadside bombs.⁴⁸ The trajectory of the southern Thai insurgency is therefore worrying.

Despite the blow to JI as a result of counter-terrorist operations throughout the region since 9-11 and its most recent setbacks in 2007 in Indonesia, the problem posed by radical groups is acknowledged to be broader and long-term in nature. Although Al Qaeda's direct operational links appear to have been severed with the arrest of its senior commanders in the region, local radicals and networks have taken their place. The way that Mujahidin KOMPAK, consisting of local Muslims with deep grievances

as a result of the conflict, carried on the fighting in Poso after the peace agreement, for instance, indicates the transformation of the threat.

Moreover, the JI initially supported the Malino peace agreement in Poso because it believed that it needed time and space to proselytize and spread its radical message. The many radical groups that continue to operate openly in a democratic Indonesia to spread their ideas through education, training, proselytising and propaganda, means that the ideas contained in radical ideology, with its emphasis on violent jihad, will continue to find an audience, particularly amongst those with pre-existing grievances.

As Jason Burke correctly observed, for those who feel angry and disempowered, radical Islam provides an answer. In an age of globalisation however, the message of radical Islam is easy to pick up. As Burke ruefully observed:

This legitimizing discourse, the critical element that converts an angry young man into a human bomb, is now everywhere. You will hear it in a mosque, on the internet, from your friends, in a newspaper. You don't have to travel to Afghanistan to complete the radicalization process, you can do it from your front room, in an Islamic centre, in a park.⁴⁹

Indeed, advanced communications technologies in an age of globalisation has helped to facilitate the spread of radical ideology (and indeed any type of millenarian or apocalyptic ideology in this post-modern age). It creates a virtual world where these ideologies take root and grow, affecting the real world through its ability to self-radicalise individuals, link up cells, develop terrorist ideas and plans, and help organise actual attacks. The most insidious is the ability to enable a worldwide network of jihadists to emerge and develop. The phenomenon of self-radicalisation means that even without the efforts of local radical groups, individuals could still become radicalised to join militant terrorist groups.

However, this inevitably leads to the question as to why some people might be attracted to militant ideology. Jason Burke has succinctly observed that:

The root causes of modern militancy are the myriad reasons for the grievances that are the first step on the road to terrorism. It is not a question of absolute deprivation but of how deprivation is perceived. Yet, social and economic problems, though the link to terrorism is indirect, are critical as a pre-condition. Such problems are growing more, not less, widespread and profound throughout the Islamic world.⁵⁰

It is the perceived injustices that are driving the resort to violence and terror tactics. In Southeast Asia, the continued violence in Sulawesi in Indonesia after the Malino agreements demonstrated that much more needs to be done in order to stem the fundamental grievances that are the sources of violence. They include the need to address local grievances such as the provision of basic services and the resettlement of displaced persons, the need to provide compensation and other forms of assistance as promised, the prosecution of those involved in past violence, the strengthening of the legal system, better security, measures to address the culture of impunity, the need to reduce the availability of weapons, and reintegrating those who had fought on both sides of the conflict, particularly the rehabilitation of young *mujahideen* fighters who

have no skills and few prospects for employment. As the International Crisis Group pointed out, rehabilitation and reintegration in some places may be a powerful antidote to terror and an important strategy for long-term conflict resolution.⁵¹

However, the corruption and mismanagement of post-conflict reconstruction funds has contributed to the undermining of public trust in the government and reduced its effectiveness in containing the militant problem.⁵² It is thus little wonder that Sulawesi, particularly the city of Poso, has become the focus of radical groups due to existence of the very conditions that are conducive to the spread of radical ideology. Similarly, the poor handling of post-conflict reconstruction in Aceh by the nationalist GAM may in the near future may make more radical alternatives attractive to sections of a long-suffering Acehnese population.

Improving Counter-Terrorism

How then can counter-terrorism efforts be improved? As Gareth Evans of the International Crisis Group correctly noted:

We are dealing with a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon, which demands a complex, multi-layered response. Good policy sometimes require not simplification but complexification ... the struggle against violent extremism can be won, but it is going to be neither quick nor easy, and it is going to require a lot more thought and application and persistence, a lot more balanced approach, and a lot more attention to underlying causes and currents as distinct from surface manifestations.⁵³

An effective counter-terrorism approach therefore requires a “complex, multi-layered response”, in other words, a comprehensive approach at the global, regional and local levels. At the global, strategic level, what is needed is a multilateral and comprehensive approach designed to contain the new global terrorism through the winning of hearts and minds of the Muslim world, where the true center of gravity lies. What has to be abandoned is the unilateral and uni-dimensional approach that has characterised the US approach.

American historian Thomas Mockaitis has argued persuasively that the whole concept of the Global War on Terrorism has be abandoned, since war, in international law, has a precise definition and does not readily lend itself to a grey-area phenomenon like terrorism.⁵⁴ War is also a problematic concept because it implies the emphasis on military force as well as an end-state of “victory,” however this is defined. Al Qaeda’s transformation, however, into a generalised global threat akin to a global insurgency necessitates a re-conceptualisation of what constitutes victory. Thus, it is necessary to re-conceptualise the Global War on Terrorism not as a war but as a Global Counter-Insurgency operation, in which there is a change in emphasis from a direct to an indirect military approach, with the military taking a more supporting role in a predominantly ideological, political and diplomatic response, that is, a comprehensive strategy.⁵⁵

An important focus of this new strategy has to be a battle for hearts and minds. As Jason Burke correctly pointed out, “the greatest weapon available in the war on terrorism is the courage, decency, humour and integrity of the vast proportion of the

world's 1.3 billion Muslims ... it is this that is restricting the spread of Al Qaeda and its warped worldview."⁵⁶ Indeed, long-term success can only come in countering the appeal of radical ideology, but this can only be done if the overwhelming majority of Muslims themselves find radical ideology unappealing. Ultimately, the problem of radicalism can only be won with the support and through the effort of the Muslim communities themselves. The center of gravity, therefore, lies within the Muslim world. So far however, the military-oriented approach to dealing with terrorism has put moderate Muslims who disagree with radical ideology on the back-foot.

This new strategy also has to be multilateral in nature if it is to succeed. This invariably means relying on international institutions, laws and norms, as well as the need to build an international consensus on countering global terrorism, in order to achieve global cooperation against it. In effect, the United States will have to learn to work with its allies and friends, in particular those from the Muslim world.

Progress against global terrorism also cannot succeed without US leadership. But this depends on the US reclaiming its moral right to lead. Success has to be measured not just in the decline in the number and scope of attacks, the collapse of terrorist morale, and a growing sense of safety amongst ordinary people, but also in the significant improvement in the political standing and general reputation of the United States in the eyes of the international, and particularly Muslim, communities. It is the legitimacy that the United States and its allies, including those in the Muslim world, need in order to marginalize the radical ideologues. To begin to reclaim that legitimacy, however, it should be clear that the United States must somehow find a way to exit from Iraq, for as long as it remains in Iraq, Muslim rage will grow and the problem of global radical terrorism will worsen.

Finally, there is a need to fix the deep-seated domestic roots of Muslim rage and alienation in Muslim countries. It is important to recognize that the roots of Muslim rage and alienation lie fundamentally in local political, economic, and social issues and conflicts, whether in Palestine, Chechnya, Kashmir, Mindanao, Sulawesi, southern Thailand or Aceh. The failure of post-conflict rebuilding in Aceh and Sulawesi (and indeed, in Iraq) indicates the need for a proper post-settlement strategy that involves governance, security and economic development. Without basic services, jobs, rehabilitation and effective local government, the alienated will not be placated and will have little to lose in resorting to arms. Failure of the peace process in Aceh, Sulawesi and Maluku could have serious consequences. In the case of Aceh, if the nationalists in GAM fail, the Acehnese could well turn to more radical alternatives. In Sulawesi, the failure to rehabilitate former fighters and to bring about development has resulted in havens for radical elements.

The New Global Counter Insurgency Strategy

The best articulated construction of the newly evolving global counter insurgency strategy has come from David Kilcullen, an Australian army colonel who is currently a chief strategist advising the US government on counter-insurgency. Central to Kilcullen's construct is his premise that globalisation and other forces have resulted in 'new' form of insurgencies that are different from those during the Cold War era. Kilcullen is critical of the efforts at rediscovering and re-visiting 'classical counter-insurgency' as an answer to the conundrum in Iraq. His critique of the old counter-

insurgency models contrasts with the ‘new’ features of insurgencies in our post-Cold War era of globalisation. For instance, he argues that modern insurgencies operate like a ‘self-synchronising swarm of independent, but cooperating cells’ and that ‘modern communications compress the operational level of war, so that almost any tactical action can have immediate strategic impact.’ He also cites terrorist savvy in creating its own mass media to fight the information war. Indeed, the case of JI validates this claim, given its current focus on proselytising through its quite sophisticated publishing industry in Indonesia.⁵⁷

According to Kilcullen, with the threat from Al Qaeda now transformed into a dispersed and amorphous global insurgency, counter-terrorism response should today be built around a global counter-insurgency strategy he called “Desegregation,” which focuses on “interdicting links between theatres, denying the ability of regional and global actors to link and exploit local actors, disrupting flows between and within *jihad* theatres, denying sanctuary areas, isolating Islamists from local populations and disrupting inputs from sources of Islamism in the greater Middle East.”⁵⁸ In other words, de-linking these localized grievances from the global jihad must thus be the key objective to any counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency strategy. Desegregation sounds much like a more sophisticated and better articulated version of the focus on containment, with greater attention to local causes of conflict.

This fascination with adapting counter-insurgency strategy to meet present day threats should come as no surprise, given that after 2003, insurgency and terrorism have become conflated in the way global terrorism and Iraq somehow became conflated. Though Iraq and global terrorism had no linkages, the US actions in Iraq have made this a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ultimately, there are no easy answers. A comprehensive approach focusing on winning hearts and minds; desegregating local conflicts from the global jihad; using a range of military and non-military instruments; building a global consensus against terrorism and global cooperation; and achieving a whole of government approach to dealing with terrorism and insurgency, all take time and effort to bear fruit. Patience and a long-term perspective are therefore required. As Philip Gordon observed, “ultimately, violent Islamism is not likely to win enduring support ... with time and experience, and if the United States and its allies make the right choices, Muslims will themselves turn against the extremists in their midst.”⁵⁹ In the final analysis, the war on terror is in fact a long-term ideological struggle.

Notes

¹ “Al Qaeda’s Profile: Slimmer but More Menacing,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 September 2003

² The term “Islamist” does not refer to all Muslims. It refers only to those who subscribe to radical, violent interpretations of Islam, a distinct minority amongst Muslims.

³ Andrew T H Tan, *A Political and Economic Dictionary of Southeast Asia* (London: Europa, 2004), p.44.

⁴ Andrew T H Tan, *A Political and Economic Dictionary of Southeast Asia*, pp.136-137.

⁵ See *Al Qaeda in Southeast Asia: The Case of the Ngruki Network in Indonesia*, Asia Briefing No. 20, 8 August 2002, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 4 October 2006.

⁶ *Jemaah Islamiyah in Southeast Asia: Damaged But Dangerous*, Asia Briefing No.63, 26 August 2003, International Crisis Group, Executive Summary

- ⁷ See *Indonesia Backgrounder: Jihad in Central Sulawesi*, Asia Report No. 74, 3 February 2004, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 16 February 2008.
- ⁸ Andrew T H Tan (ed), *The Politics of Terrorism* (London: Routledge, 2006), p.165.
- ⁹ "Azahari Was Shot Dead," *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November 2005
- ¹⁰ "Spite Islands," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, 20 January 2000, p.18.
- ¹¹ "Independence Calls Grow in Strife-Torn Islands," *Straits Times*, 23 June 2000, p.43.
- ¹² "The Moluccas Agreement in Malino (Malino II) Signed to End Conflict and Create Peace in the Moluccas", Government of Indonesia, 14 February 2002, <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/ACOS-64CDMA?OpenDocument> accessed 26 March 2008.
- ¹³ *Indonesia: Tackling Radicalism in Poso*, Asia Briefing No. 75, 22 January 2008, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 16 February 2008, pp.1-2.
- ¹⁴ *Jihadism in Indonesia: Poso on the Edge*, Asia Report No. 127, 24 January 2007, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 26 March 2008, p.1.
- ¹⁵ *Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's Current Status*, Asia Briefing No. 63, 3 May 2007, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 16 February 2008, p.2.
- ¹⁶ Executive Summary, *Terrorism in Indonesia: Noordin's Networks*, Asia Report No. 114, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 26 March 2008.
- ¹⁷ "Southeast Asia's Most Wanted Fugitive," *BBC News*, 5 September 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4302368.stm>
- ¹⁸ "Interpol Alert Follows Suspect Escape," Associated Press, 29 February 2008, <http://www.wtopnews.com/?nid=105&sid=1353308>
- ¹⁹ See Andrew Tan, *Armed Rebellion in the ASEAN States: Persistence and Implications* (Canberra: Strategic and Defence Studies Center, Australian National University, 2000), pp.96-98.
- ²⁰ Interview with a retired senior Malaysian military commander in February 2006. See also Andrew T H Tan, *Security Perspectives of the Malay Archipelago: Security Linkages in the Second Front in the War Against Terrorism* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2004), p.119.
- ²¹ For a study of the Al-Ma'unah and the KMM, see Elina Noor, "Al-Ma'unah and KMM in Malaysia," in Andrew T H Tan (ed), *A Handbook of Terrorism and Insurgency in Southeast Asia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2007), pp. 167-193.
- ²² Andrew T H Tan (ed), *The Politics of Terrorism*, pp.116-117.
- ²³ "Widening the War in the Southern Philippines," *Asia Times*, 18 May 2007, <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast Asia/IE18Ae01.html> accessed 26 March 2008.
- ²⁴ Yasser Igasan Succeeds Janjalani as New Abu Chief," *GMA News TV*, 27 June 2007, <http://www.gmanews.tv/story/48531/Yasser-Igasan-succeeds-Janjalani-as-Abu-chief>
- ²⁵ Rommel Banlaoi, "The Rise of the Rajah Solaiman Movement (RSM): Suicide Terrorism in the Philippines", *IDSS Commentaries*, No. 109, 2006.
- ²⁶ "JI Suspect Claims He Was Trained by MILF," *The Manila Times*, 9 October 2007, http://www.manilatimes.net/national/2007/oct/09/yehey/top_stories/20071009top4.html
- ²⁷ Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam in Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2003), pp.90-91.
- ²⁸ *Mindanao Times Interactive News*, <mindanaotimes.com.p/news>, 2 March 2002.
- ²⁹ *Mindanao Times Interactive News*, <mindanaotimes.com.p/news>, 18 April 2002.
- ³⁰ *Mindanao Times Interactive News*, <mindanaotimes.com.p/news>, 13 June 2002.
- ³¹ *Mindanao Times Interactive News*, <mindanaotimes.com.p/news>, 22 October 2002.
- ³² "Military's Positive Role in MILF Peace Process," *Newsbreak Online*, 26 April 2007, www.newsbreak.com.ph
- ³³ GRP, MILF Extend IMT Stay for One More Year, Expand IMT Scope, Too," *Minda News*, 28 August 2007.
- ³⁴ Andrew T H Tan (ed), *The Politics of Terrorism*, p.198.
- ³⁵ See, for instance, "The Thai Connection", *Al Ahram Weekly*, Issue No. 689, 6-12 May 2004, <http://weekly.ahram.org> accessed on 5 October 2006.
- ³⁶ "Targeting Thailand," *Time*, 19 January 2003.
- ³⁷ "Official Apology To Thailand's Muslims," *New York Times*, 3 November 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/11/03/world/asia/03bangkok.html?fta=y>
- ³⁸ Esther Pan, *Indonesia: The Aceh Peace Agreement*, Council on Foreign Relations, 15 September 2005, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/8789/>
- ³⁹ *Aceh: Post-Conflict Complications*, Asia Report No. 139, 4 October 2007, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>> accessed on 16 February 2008, p.2.

-
- ⁴⁰ Andrew T H Tan, "Security Challenges of East and Southeast Asia," *The Far East and Australasia 2008* (London: Europa, 2008), p.13.
- ⁴¹ Fact Sheet, *Comprehensive List of Terrorists and Groups Identified Under Executive Order 13224*, Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State, Washington, 11 October 2002, <http://www.fas.org/irp/news/2002/10/dos101102.html>
- ⁴² Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/topics/sco/t57970.htm> accessed 26 March 2008.
- ⁴³ "Terror Attack A Warning Shot for Beijing," *Asia Times*, 14 March 2008.
- ⁴⁴ "JI Detainee's Long Road to Reform: From Bomb Makers to Peace Lovers?" *Straits Times*, 3 February 2007, pp. S8-9.
- ⁴⁵ Bruce Hoffman, "Combating Al Qaeda and the Militant Islamic Threat," Testimony presented to the House Armed Services Committee, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Unconventional Threats and Capabilities on February 16, 2006 (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006), p.3
- ⁴⁶ Adam Dolnik and Rohan Gunaratna, "Dagger and Sarin: The Evolution of Terrorist Weapons and Tactics," in Andrew T H Tan (ed), *The Politics of Terrorism*, pp.35-36.
- ⁴⁷ Bruce Hoffman, "Combating Al Qaeda and the Militant Islamic Threat," p.12.
- ⁴⁸ "Bloodletting in Troubled Thai South Continues," *Straits Times*, 16 March 2006.
- ⁴⁹ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.308.
- ⁵⁰ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, p.306.
- ⁵¹ *Weakening Indonesia's Mujahidin Networks: Lessons from Maluku and Poso*, Asia Report No. 113, 13 October 2005, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>>
- ⁵² *Indonesia: Tackling Radicalism in Poso*, p.10
- ⁵³ Gareth Evans, "The Global Response to Terrorism," 2005 Wallace Wurth Lecture, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 27 September 2005, p.13.
- ⁵⁴ Thomas Mockaitis, "Counter-Terrorism," p.110.
- ⁵⁵ Bruce Hoffman, "Combating Al Qaeda and the Militant Islamic Threat," p.14.
- ⁵⁶ Jason Burke, *Al Qaeda: The True Story of Radical Islam*, p.313.
- ⁵⁷ See *Indonesia: Jemaah Islamiyah's Publishing Industry*, Asia Report No.147, 28 February 2008, International Crisis Group, <<http://www.crisisgroup.org>>
- ⁵⁸ See the Executive Summary of David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency", *Small Wars Journal*, 30 November 2004, <http://www.smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf>
- ⁵⁹ Philip H Gordon, "Winning the Right War," *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 4, Winter 2007-8, pp.38-39